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THE LOCKPORT PROPOSAL

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Municipal conditions in the city of Lockport are much the same as in many others which have suffered from the typical ills of American democracy. The city has a population somewhat under 20,000, and has been ruled for years by a triumvirate of bosses. Popular control has been a negligible quantity, and the rule of the self-appointed trio has been anything but one responsive to the will of the people of the city. As a natural consequence of the aloofness of the government, needed improvements have been delayed for years at a stretch, and when actually undertaken, have been executed in a most inefficient and expensive manner. It was these conditions which led the Lockport Board of Trade to become sponsor for the plan of municipal organization which has come to be known as the "Lockport Proposal," which was embodied in a bill introduced into the 1911 session of the New York legislature and supported by the Commission Government Association of New York State.

The "Lockport plan" is built upon the same basic principle as the Des Moines commission government law, but it aims to correct what seem to many to be illogical features of that plan. The commission government movement is based primarily upon the theory of the union of legislative and administrative powers in the hands of a small body of men who are the sole responsible agents of the people. It is a theory, borne out in practice, that this small group of men, because of their conspicuous position, tend to feel a responsibility to their constituents in a degree which virtually restores government to the people. The Des Moines plan, however, does not carry this theory of responsibility to its logical conclusion. The commission of five men are not collectively responsible for the acts of the municipality. Neither are the individual commissioners. At first blush these statements may startle some readers, but note carefully the following hypothetical situation. Let us suppose that the majority of the commission have passed an ordinance providing for the repavement of the main thoroughfare. Let us suppose that

the commissioner of streets and public property was not a member of the majority which passed the resolution, and happens also to be a man of independent ideas. What action can the responsible commission take to force one of its own number to execute its orders? Now suppose another situation: The commissioner of streets is desirous of placing electroliers in the public squares. Public sentiment is clamoring for such action, but on looking over his annual budget, the commissioner finds that it is insufficient to cover this added expense. He applies to the commission for a larger appropriation and they refuse. In that case, who is responsible for the inaction of the city government? Cases of such conflict have actually been brought forward in some of the commission governed cities.

Under the Lockport plan responsibility would be vested in five men, acting always collectively. They would meet with no such difficulty in enforcing their orders as in the case cited, for the party responsible for the actual execution of orders would not be one of their own number but an appointive creature of theirs—the city manager. In short, the Lockport plan is an exact parallel of the organization of a private business corporation, with the city council corresponding to the board of directors and the city manager to the general manager. This city manager is the unique feature of the “Lockport plan.” But while it is a unique proposal in the organization of city governments, it is by no means novel in other forms of organization. Not only have private corporations reached what appears to be their ultimate form in this particular type of organization, but it is the plan which operates in large school systems throughout the United States, in which the superintendent of schools corresponds to the city manager. It is also a very close approximation to the German type of city government, in which the *Burgomeister* is the central administrative agent and the council is the ultimate responsible body, which lays down the policy of the municipality. Of course, the German cities look back upon a totally different set of traditions from the American. Still, the naked question of municipal administration is not one which is concerned with the political genius of a people. Certainly, under the “Lockport proposal,” the voice of the people has just as effective a medium as under the Des Moines plan. And, once we concede this fact, there remains the simple question of best organization.

The "Lockport proposal" looks forward to a time when municipal government will be conducted by real experts. To suppose that popular election in the great majority of cases will secure expert service seems almost fatuous. Even the most educated of our citizens must fail if called upon to choose, let us say, between the technical qualifications of two candidates for a position which requires an engineer's training. On the other hand, an appointive expert could be found to take general charge of the city administration who could select trained assistants under the most favorable conditions. The city manager himself would, supposedly, be a rather high salaried officer and might be taken from any part of the country. There would seem to be in this country ample material from which to choose such an officer. In the event that such a proposal should receive wide adoption, it is easily conceivable that there would arise in the United States a class of municipal experts. The profession would be a most alluring one to men of talent and vision, and it seems hardly too much to suppose that we would come to have a combination of democracy and municipal efficiency which has never before been effected.

The Lockport plan, again, has certain possibilities which seem to place it on a higher level as a democratic instrument than the ordinary commission plan. The latter system has been strongly advocated by "business" interests. Labor, for this reason has frequently looked askance at the movement, and perhaps not always without some just cause. In order to achieve true democracy, every important element in the city should be represented in the council, but if every councilman is to be both a representative of certain class interests and desires, and also a municipal expert, what is labor to gain? Many men who would prove most excellent representatives of labor would fail when confronted with problems of municipal administration. What is a barber, for example, apt to know about the administration of finance? And yet that same barber may be the truest representative and best spokesman of labor in the community. The "Lockport plan" would not embarrass him by requiring him to take charge of a department, but would simply require him to exercise his representative functions on the council.

The salaries which are usually paid under the commission plan are not sufficiently large in all cases to attract real experts. If the

best brains of the community were required simply to pass judgment on policies and leave the execution of those policies to a salaried chief executive, many men of large calibre would be willing to devote to the city's business the small amount of time and energy which such a commissionership would require.

On the whole, then, it seems as though the "Lockport plan" has made a certain contribution to the solution of the twofold problem of municipal government in this country, viz.: that of securing administrative efficiency, which at the same time preserves all the essentials of democracy.

Aside from the features above noted, the Lockport plan embodies the usual minor features of the commission plan, including non-partisan nominations, elections at large, initiative, referendum, recall, etc. One minor feature, however, should be noted viz.: nominations by deposit. Under this plan, the candidate, in lieu of a petition, may put up a deposit of fifty dollars, in order to have his name appear on the ballot. In case he receives fifteen per cent or more of the total vote cast, or turns out to be, in other words, a serious candidate, his deposit is returned. This method is borrowed from the Canadian election law, and is believed to be a wise alternative to the system of nomination by petition.